

News Bites

South Africa

Attacks on sick Manto 'a violation' – Zuma

Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma proposed last month that the Democratic Alliance's 'blatantly insensitive' remarks about ailing Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang should be discussed at an international human rights seminar.

She also suggested that a cake sale at the University of Pretoria organised by Freedom Front students to protest over affirmative action and corruption in the ruling ANC should be scrutinised at the seminar.

She was sharing a platform with Argentinian Foreign Minister Jorge Tiaian as they jointly opened a seminar in Pretoria organised by the Argentinian embassy, the University of Pretoria and the SA government to compare the human rights experiences of the two countries which had both suffered gross human rights violations in recent history.

She appeared to be referring to the sale of cup cakes by Freedom Front students where black customers were charged less than white customers to symbolise the preferential treatment of blacks under affirmative action and ANC members were charged nothing – but had to donate money into an anti-corruption fund.

Dlamini-Zuma also took a swipe at the DA for its demand that President Mbeki remove Tshabalala-Msimang from office because she was too ill to do her job.

SA medics behind on payments to get registration reprieve

Doctors who have fallen behind with registration payments are getting a reprieve, thanks to a bid by the HPCSA to help them get back to work in South Africa. The Council will waive penalties for doctors, locally and abroad, who didn't pay their annual registration fees on time. Registrar, advocate Boyce Mkhize, said an amnesty period will kick off on 1 February and continue until 30 April.

Government AIDS policy hinders treatment

South Africa has the means to reduce the number of children born infected with HIV to less than 2% – but doctors feel 'hamstrung' by government policy, which does not conform to international guidelines. Speaking at the Wits AIDS Research Symposium, Dr Ashraf Coovadia said that 'What we are providing

is sub-standard treatment that is less than what the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines stipulate'. There are more effective treatments available, but nevirapine is the treatment of choice, because it is an inexpensive way to prevent an infected mother passing on the virus to her child. Coovadia said the government is well aware of the scientific evidence supporting the introduction of a better regimen for preventing a mother infecting her baby, but had not acted on it.

Six-month lay-off from nevirapine urged for new moms

HIV-positive pregnant women who take single-dose nevirapine during labour to prevent infecting their babies should not use the drug again for at least six months after giving birth. This is according to a study published in a recent edition of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which has shown that if these women use the drug within the six-month period, it is not effective as the virus would have developed resistance to it.

Stealing SA secrets

Pelargonium, a plant used in cold and flu remedies, has become a new battleground in the campaign to protect South Africa's indigenous flora and traditional knowledge from bio-pirates. Mariam Mayet, founder of the African Centre for Biosafety, recently complained that two species of the plant were being patented in the USA and Europe as a cold remedy, 'based on Zulu and Xhosa traditional knowledge'. Mayet said the German pharmaceutical company Iso Arzneimittel applied for three patents on *Pelargonium sidoides* and *Pelargonium reniforme* in the USA and Europe in 2001.

TB patients taken to different hospital after violent protest

A group of 21 TB patients were transferred from Sizwe Hospital in Edenvale to a Pretoria hospital after they locked staff out of the hospital in January. The protest action followed grievances over medical care and the patients' complaint that they had not seen a doctor for more than two months. Police officers – masked and wearing surgical gloves to avoid infection – used truncheons to break up the protesters, who were frog-marched and carried to waiting police vans.

Cash boost for hospitals

The national health department has given the Port Elizabeth Hospital Complex R30 million to help cure its staff crisis. The

complex has to fill nearly 300 vacant posts. Some of the vacant posts have not been staffed since 2003.

State entrenches health care trio's dominance

Government initiatives will help the three dominant groups that control 75% of the private hospital market in South Africa to remain entrenched in their positions. The positions of Network Healthcare Holdings (Netcare), Medi-Clinic and Life Healthcare would be helped by the expected increase of 15% in the medical aid membership of government employees, according to an in-depth study of the South African private hospital sector by Citigroup. 'The moratorium on (hospital) licences effectively raises barriers to entry and allows the three hospital groups to enjoy the benefits of an oligopoly,' the report says. 'In addition, draft legislation prohibiting doctors from having a direct shareholding in hospitals provides the three listed groups with an opportunity to increase their stakes.'

State hospitals cough up as nurses leave for better pay

Johannesburg Hospital is feeling the pinch as nurses continue to leave state hospitals for better pay and working conditions, forcing hospitals to hire nurses from agencies at higher rates. Johannesburg Hospital alone spent more than R19m in payments for agency nurses in 2005 – more than three times what the hospital spent in 2003, because nurses were leaving faster than they were hired, said Gauteng health MEC Brain Hlongwa. A review of eight hospitals in the province released last year found 'acute shortages of staff, particularly nurses and other professionals such as pharmacists and radiographers'. It was felt that the shortage was affecting patient care, particularly as it led to more hospital-related infections.

Children of tik moms often abused, neglected

Up to 10% of pregnant mothers in some parts of Cape Town are addicted to tik, and health authorities and child care organisations are concerned that the highly toxic drug may have a lifelong effect on the babies of addicts. Groote Schuur Hospital's neonatal head of department, Professor Pieper, said that these babies were potentially permanently brain damaged and in some cases the babies' brains were literally 'scrambled'. The 'high' caused by the drug, as well as its stimulating effect

on libido, could lead to a loss of inhibition and risky sexual behaviour, including neglecting to use a condom. A number of social workers interviewed in December also confirmed a link between tik and rape.

SA has most AIDS orphans

South Africa has the most AIDS orphans in the world because of its denial of the epidemic, a UN Children's Fund report has found. This had allowed AIDS to take off aggressively. The report said the world's response to the need to protect and support HIV-infected and -affected children was insufficient. It found that 15 million children under the age of 18 worldwide were AIDS orphans. Almost half of them were themselves HIV-positive and living in orphanages or with family members chronically ill from the virus. The report focused on data from 2005. It found that a total of 15.2 million children around the world had lost at least one parent to AIDS. Most of these children were in sub-Saharan Africa – and 1.2-million were in South Africa.

Achmat accused of genocide in world court

Treatment Action Campaign leader Zackie Achmat should be charged with 'genocide' for campaigning for the rollout of antiretroviral drugs to HIV-infected people, says advocate Anthony Brink, chief of the Treatment Information Group. Likening Achmat to a 'nazi', Brink says ARVs are 'toxic' and 'poison' – killing mostly poor black South Africans faster than the disease they were supposed to treat. He has laid a charge with the international criminal court at The Hague. Nathan Geffen of the TAC said he could not believe the issue was being taken so seriously, and called the matter 'bizarre'.

Africa

Poisonous sanitary pads confiscated

The Zimbabwean police refuse to return 81 packs of sanitary pads that were confiscated during a road block. The police felt that it could influence the reproduction ability of rural Zimbabweans. The Zimbabwean Trade Union has taken offence to the accusations, since the pads were received from a non-governmental organisation for distribution among farm workers.

International

Most important medical advance in last 150 years?

Sanitation was voted the most important medical milestone in the past century and

a half in a January poll conducted by the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*.

Improved sewage disposal and clean water supply systems, which have reduced diseases such as cholera, were the overwhelming favourite of 11 341 people worldwide who voted in the *BMJ* survey. It surpassed antibiotics, the discovery of DNA, and anaesthesia, which were among the top five milestones in the poll. Participants were asked what they thought was the biggest medical advance since the journal was established in 1840. 'I'm delighted that sanitation is recognised by so many people as such an important milestone,' said Professor Johan Mackenbach, of Erasmus University Medical Centre in Rotterdam, who championed the sanitation choice. 'The general lesson which still holds is that passive protection against health hazards is often the best way to improve population health,' he added.

Cancer drug shows promise in early trial

An experimental cancer drug designed to cut off the blood supply that feeds tumours has shown promise in a small-scale trial on human volunteers. The drug blocks an enzyme involved in the processing of nitric oxide, a chemical that helps maintain the tumour's blood supply, thus enabling cancer cells to grow and divide. 'We saw significant tumour regression, with minimal side-effects,' said Jack Roth, a professor at the University of Texas Anderson Cancer Center and the author of the study. 'The low toxicity of this treatment suggests we should be able to give high doses of it.' The researchers said this therapy could be a viable alternative to chemotherapy for aggressive lung cancers that have spread to other organs. They said this was so because, unlike chemotherapy, it spared healthy cells and, in mice at least, has a better response rate.

Bilingualism delays onset of dementia

People who are fully bilingual and speak both languages every day for most of their lives can delay the onset of dementia by up to four years compared with those who only know one language, Canadian scientists said this January.

Researchers said the extra effort involved in using more than one language appeared to boost blood supply to the brain and ensure nerve connections remained healthy – two factors thought to help fight off dementia. 'We are pretty dazzled by the results,' said Professor Ellen Bialystok of Toronto's York University.

Bialystok's team focused on 184 elderly patients with signs of dementia who

attended a Toronto memory clinic between 2002 and 2005. Of the group, 91 spoke only one language while 93 were bilingual.

'The researchers determined that the mean age of onset of dementia symptoms in the monolingual group was 71.4 years, while in the bilingual group it was 75.5 years,' the statement said.

'This difference remained even after considering the possible effect of cultural differences, immigration, formal education, employment and even gender as (influences) in the results,' it added.

Bialystok stressed that bilingualism helped delay the start of dementia rather than preventing it altogether.

Chew yourself to a new body

An experimental anti-obesity drug that could one day be given as a chewing gum is among three projects to win funding under a new scheme. One of the world's biggest medical research funders, Wellcome, said it had awarded a research grant to Imperial College London for the work under its £91 million (nearly R100 million) seeding drug discovery scheme – reputedly the largest of its kind outside the USA. Tests have indicated that small doses of the hormone, pancreatic polypoid, can decrease the amount of food that is eaten.

Young ones with high IQ tend to be vegetarian

A report recently issued in Britain shows that children with a high IQ tend to become vegetarians when they grow up. Research on 8 000 men and women aged 30 years and whose IQ was tested when they were 10 years old, indicated that the higher the IQ the bigger the chance that the person will become a vegetarian. Dr Catherine Gale of the University of Southampton said the results confirmed that people who are more intelligent are more likely to eat healthy and to exercise.

Quest for 'holy grail' of AIDS drug treatment

Last month Fred Gordon, an AIDS specialist at the Washington Veterans Affairs Medical Center and a group of researchers will ask the United States government to underwrite an audacious effort to answer the 'when-to-start' question. They plan to propose to the National Institutes of Health an international study that would enrol more than 9 000 people, children and adults, from poor and rich countries to determine at what stage of the virus it would be best to commence with antiretroviral therapy.

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